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Critical Thinking: critical choices

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For a number of years I have been discussing the notion of critical thinking with students working in all disciplines and at all levels, a topic that now seemingly enjoys a ubiquitous existence in higher education. Despite numerous debates rumbling on regarding the definition of critical thinking, its importance to learning has remained an unquestionable and prominent concern, often being referred to as, the 'promised land' (Papastephanou & Angeli, 2007), or defining concept of higher education, but is all well on the critical front?

This attention on critical thinking has led to the development of its own discourse, with numerous theories and definitions that continue to be keenly contested. Unfortunately, these debates have seemingly done little to aid and foster its teaching for students and staff, and despite many academics' best intentions, there remain question marks over the evidence of our ability to teach it. Indeed, some contest whether we are able to teach it at all (Davies, 2011). So where is critical thinking being developed or 'taught' at university?

Working with university students, helping them to develop their academic skills, has provided a great insight into the different journeys students must take in order to try and reach this promised land. Some follow a straight and easy path; others take more treacherous and even circular routes, never reaching the prescribed destination. Institutional responses to such struggles are, more often than not, to provide 'how to' guides and 'bolt-on' support (Wingate, 2006) that offer recipes for critical or analytical success!

Fortunately, for the thousands of students yet to study at university, concerns are now rightly being raised over the limited and narrow conceptualisation of critical thinking caused by prioritising its facilitation in this way (Brookfield, 2012; Masschelein, 2004). Such an approach has been described as risking the trivialisation of critique, where students are able to 'do' critical thinking, but are not the 'critical beings' society needs (Barnett, 1997).

So there are gaps between our aspirations and practice, and there is a clear need for further research and evaluation to identify the degree to which critical thinking skills are being developed at university (Hammer and Green, 2011). While much of the research and analysis that has been preoccupied with trying to explain and define critical thinking, our comprehension of the concept still remains under question, particularly with regards to its conveyance and development in students (Moore, 2011; Wass et al. 2011). However, as this journal so emphatically demonstrates there is cause for great optimism.

Greater attention is now being placed on the development of students' critical thinking, and a few consistent themes are being identified. In particular, more holistic approaches are needed, with an appreciation of knowledge, self and world, and of other's perspectives on these. Critical thinking is increasingly being seen as a social activity, to be developed through dialogue with teachers, researchers and peers, not in writing isolation. Further to this, a significant role can be played by genuine, real-world, student research, exposing students to different perceptions of knowledge, and how it is created and understood.

Stephen Brookfield (2012) has accumulated a great deal of data with regards to how students 'get' critical thinking, his findings suggest most ground is made when students see, share and experience critical thinking in action, when it is scaffolded and worked up to, and when students are taken out of their 'comfort zones' into less familiar environments. For it is these 'disorienting dilemmas' where transformative learning can really take place, and particularly when students are involved in research projects, such as those found in this journal.

Brookfield's (2012) five points for developing students' critical thinking:

- It is a social process, so small group work is excellent
- It is helpful if tutors model it by explaining their critical decisions
- It is beneficial if it can be grounded in concrete experiences, such as real-world case studies
- Get students out of their comfort zones, disorienting dilemmas lead to transformative learning, so more holistic and cross-disciplinary analysis
- It is an incremental and developmental process, scaffold and build up to it gradually

The educational philosopher, Basil Bernstein, claimed that the elitist nature of disciplines and their hierarchical organisation of knowledge resulted in the mystery of knowledge, and that its potential for new and creative ways of thinking was revealed only to a select few, and even then, late on in their educational lives (Bernstein, 1975). Meaning, it is only these chosen few who get to experience the truly contestable nature of knowledge, and hence really get to the heart of what critical thinking is about. Bernstein therefore recognised the value of combating such elitism by engaging students in research early on in their studies.

If factual knowledge obtained at university is at risk of becoming outdated or forgotten as some have suggested (Terenzini et al., 1995), then a graduate skill such as critical thinking is going to be an even more essential and desirable outcome of higher education: not the narrow version that has found its way too easily into our curriculum, but as a fundamental part of developing, or even liberating, sustainably literate graduates who are ready and able to take up their role as effective participants in society.

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